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Mining the Mundane and Finding Gold: Reality, Imagination and the Magical in Jackie Kay's Short Fiction

Ingibjörg Ágústsdóttir

Introduction

1 Jackie Kay, currently Scotland's Makar (since 2016), is a prolific and versatile writer who is hailed by Monica Germanà as one of "key representatives of a new generation of Scottish writers" whose work "brings energetic engagement with buried identities" (2012, p. 162), and one who, in the assessment of Susan Tranter, has moved from "marginal voice to national treasure" (2008) in the last two decades or so. Kay has published a wide variety of literary works since the turn of the century, such as collections of poetry, dramatized poetry, a children's novel, three short story collections, autobiographical writing, plays for young people, and a novella. At least in part due to her own background, being Scottish, African, adopted and "brought up in Glasgow by white, working class socialists" (Rowell, 2014, p. 268), along with being a lesbian, Kay is very much concerned with identity, whether racial, cultural, social, sexual, or gendered, and in her exploration of the various ambiguities of identity she "constantly challenges exclusive, essentialist, and normative views" (Schrage-Früh, 2009, p. 167). Kay is also very interested in exploring boundaries, or "the borderlines that exist between one state and another and one country and another, one state of mind and other" (Rowell, 2014, p. 268). This relates very strongly to her concern with identity, as for Kay identity is very fluid and "can never be fixed or frozen" (cited by Pittin-Hédon, 2017); thus there is a sense of plurality within identity for Kay (Lumsden, 2000, p. 90) as well as the potential for a crossing (or crossings) of boundaries or states of mind.

2 In her three short story collections, *Why Don't You Stop Talking* (2002), *Wish I Was Here* (2006), and *Reality, Reality* (2012), Kay presents a variety of stories most of which

engage with the lives of ordinary people, many on the margins or from "the unfashionable literary shadows" (Tranter, 2008), such as the elderly, the obese, the sick, the unloved, the mentally unstable, the exploited and victimized; often the characters presented are intensely lonely and unhappy people. For Kay, the short story is ideal for exploring such narratives; she sees the short story as a form "concerned with outsiders who have slightly bleak lives" and one that seems to "suit the solitary voice" (O'Malley, 2014). While her characters are ordinary people that the reader can easily relate to, they are also people whose lives are not extensively covered in literature, and this is one aspect that attracts Kay as a writer: "I do feel like I'm drawn to creating characters whose stories are not familiar." ("The SRB Interview", 2016) Not surprisingly, identity in its many forms is an important point of departure here, while memory, love and loss are prevalent themes, among others. The issue of reality (or realities)—or the question of what is *really* real—is central to Kay's exploration of unfamiliar stories of people on the margins. Her interest in "exploring the threshold between fact and fiction, between reality and imagination" (Gray, 2010, p. 156) is clearly shown, and the short stories discussed in this essay have some striking plot elements with fantastical and supernatural aspects. This may seem paradoxical since all stories actually portray realistic situations, circumstances and states of mind. Therefore, they cannot normally be straightforwardly classified as fantasy or ghost stories. Rather, I would argue that Kay is here writing within the mode of magic realism. As Anne C. Hegerfeldt asserts, "magic realist fiction characteristically opens up two perspectives simultaneously, a realistic and a magical one" while one of its techniques is "the naturalization or [...] 'banalization' of the fantastic" (2005, pp. 33 and 199). Further, magic realist fiction playfully blurs the categories "real" and "fantastic", suggesting that the distinction between these two categories "is perhaps less easy than generally acknowledged within a rational-empirical framework" (ibid., p. 201). In the stories discussed here, imagination (or even firm belief in the fantastic/supernatural) provides an escape for the character from an unbearable reality, thus functioning as an important intersection between what is real and what is fantastical, magical or even ghostly. In the process, the characters' reality becomes fantastical, albeit to varying degrees. At the same time, what the character is imagining seems real within the limited narrative perspective, "the solitary voice", thereby naturalizing what otherwise would seem impossible in the real world. Thus imagination works to destabilize and blur the boundaries between the real and the unreal, between the physical and the spectral, the rational and the magical. Through this type of effect, the themes and issues under scrutiny—loneliness, memory, illness, love, loss, and so on—are brought more sharply into focus while seemingly trivial, everyday problems transcend their "ordinariness" and are shown to be exciting and worthwhile topics of literary exploration.

Disordered lives: "The woman with the fork and knife disorder" and "Shell"

3 In her short story collection *Why Don't You Stop Talking*, Kay focuses on eccentric people and general outsiders in society that live on the edge due to their color, sexuality, being overweight or old, or suffering from mental or physical health problems (Schrage-Früh, 2009, p. 174). In the context of this paper, two stories are especially notable, "The woman with the fork and knife disorder" and "Shell". In the former, the main

character, Irene Elliot, is shown to gradually descend into madness in the aftermath of a divorce. Irene's husband has recently walked out on her and she is now left on her own with an indifferent and insolent teenage daughter. She has always been the model housewife, cooking lovely meals and keeping things in perfect order, with everything "neat, properly sorted" and in "the right place" (Kay, 2011a, p. 90). Now, however, disorder strikes in the cutlery drawer as the knives and forks keep rearranging themselves, first moving to different compartments in the drawer and later turning up in the strangest of places outside the drawer, such as the fridge. The disorder among the cutlery and its continued acting up increase in magnitude and reach fantastical proportions, as the situation "goes from real to unreal" (Sienkiewicz-Charlish, 2011, p. 81). To Irene, however, this is all too real, as she believes (or imagines) that it is truly happening, so she is "literally driven mad by her cutlery" as stated by Kay (Rowell, 2014, p. 271). The limited third person perspective encourages the reader to perceive events in the same or similar manner as Irene, also due to the intimate relationship between fictional characters and readers in Kay's stories that is created by the "oral, colloquial style" of her narration (Jansen, 2018, p. 172). Irene's own belief in these "magically real" events therefore works to naturalize them, both for Irene and the reader. At the same time, the "fork and knife disorder" is clearly shown to be reflective of the disintegration that has overtaken Irene's life, as well as reflecting her own loosening grip on reality and gradual loss of sanity. Irene is in a state of shock after her husband's selfish desertion of her, so that, symbolic of Irene's situation, the forks seem to her "like a bunch of strange people missing their spouses" once they are incorrectly placed in the cutlery drawer (Kay, 2011a, p. 94). She has lost her sense of direction and purpose, feels she is "living on a knife-edge", that she cannot co-ordinate and has "two different sides" that refuse to co-operate (ibid., pp. 93 and 100). On visiting the doctor hoping for a cure to this peculiar disorder, she feels that if he listened to her heart, "he would know it was broken" (ibid., p. 101) and later she thinks of suicide. The grief and sense of betrayal is too much for Irene, who feels herself "split" and wants to "cut herself in two" (ibid., pp. 107–8). As Sienkiewicz-Charlish (2011, pp. 84–5) argues, the idea of duality and the split psyche, arguably a particularly Scottish theme, is therefore important here. The different types of cutlery needed for the unified action of eating, but now in a state of disarray, are clearly representative of Irene's psychological split. Thus the disordered forks and knives ultimately represent both this mental split as well as the break-up of marriage—the sharp edged knives symbolic for her cruel husband—both of which have changed her from "an organized and sensible person" to the "wild savage eating dirt and worms" at the story's conclusion (ibid., p. 85). Kay's employment of such banal everyday items, cutlery, importantly pivotal to Irene's sense of self-worth, makes these circumstances seem painfully real, while the banal also becomes invested with magic due to the strange movements of the cutlery. This combination, by its sheer strangeness, renders the emotional and mental distress experienced by this ordinary housewife even more vivid and poignant.

4 The troubles of Doreen, the main character of "Shell", are again highlighted through similar methods. Comparable to Irene Elliot, Doreen is single mother bringing up a moody and demanding teenage son. She is also seriously overweight and drained of energy, finding things such as rising out of bed in the morning and driving a car physically difficult. She is shown as a woman trapped within her body and within her home, her obesity having more or less confined her to the house. The fact that she is an embarrassment to her son further acerbates things. She is, like many of Kay's

characters in the stories of *Why Don't You Stop Talking*, "imprisoned by the world's silent indifference" to her lot (Clark, 2002). Slowly a sense of strangeness creeps into her circumstances as seen through Doreen's perspective:

> [...] her lower back is in agony and she feels heavy like a crate full of goods, lethargic and exhausted. [...] Her whole back feels very unstable as if it could crack, as if her spine could slip and slide further and further down herself until it disappeared. [...] she can't escape this certain feeling of another woman living inside her, quietly. (Kay, 2011a, p. 144)

5 Already there is a sense of a mental split, similar to Irene in "The woman with the fork and knife disorder". Yet the circumstances still appear realistic. Doreen is unable to stand straight and the only thing she eats is cabbage. These seem to have a rational explanation and to stem from her obesity; her weight pulls her down so that she is bent "like an old woman" (ibid., p. 146), and she is on a diet.

6 This realistic grounding is however soon undermined as Doreen experiences strange bodily transformations, first passing "white and thick" urine akin to that of birds (ibid., p. 149), and then waking up with a rock hard back and feeling something is growing there. In the mirror, she sees a shell on her back, "highly domed like the roof of an ancient church [... with] quite beautiful, delicate" lines (ibid., p. 156). Her skin begins to crack, her vision changes and she greedily eats buttercups that grow in the garden. Ultimately, she feels herself "shrink and shrink" with scales growing on her forelimbs and on her side, and thus, it appears, physically transforms into a tortoise while experiencing "a glorious feeling of relief, close to euphoria" (ibid., p. 157). Accordingly, at the end of the story, Doreen has got a real shell to shelter her from life's troubles, so that when her son picks up the tortoise and asks for a video from Blockbusters, she simply retreats into her shell in order to escape his demands. Her previously expressed desire to be a different person "altogether, with a different life, another past entirely" (ibid., p. 150) has been granted. For Doreen, the tortoise shell is a reality, a protective covering that saves her from society's judgment and her son's demands as well as his scorn. Viewed realistically, however, the shell could just as well simply be the state of obesity, as we are told that since she had the shell, she has not been bothered by her neighbors, having "retreated" and gone from "being an outgoing bubbly kind of a woman to a shy, introverted one" (ibid., p. 153). In this reading, she has basically sought shelter in her own physical state; her shell, whether real or imagined, is something she can use to escape her unbearable reality: "It is hard, although it could crack; it is protective, it is loyal and trustworthy; if she wants to she can hide her whole head inside the musky damp darkness, the forgiving darkness." (Ibid., p. 152) Again, as in "The woman with the fork and knife disorder", Kay utilizes a rather ordinary thing—in this case a tortoise—and renders it fantastical, simultaneously blurring the boundaries between the real and the unreal/fantastical/magical, thus drawing attention to the everyday problems and emotional suffering people such as Doreen have to undergo. These issues—the sense of grief and betrayal at your spouse's hands, mental disorders, obesity—are issues that may sometimes be viewed as unimportant, even treated with indifference or contempt, but in Kay's treatment they get accorded their true value, as something valid, something truly worthy of our attention, troubles we should respect and empathize with. In this sense, "the violation of realism achieves a greater degree of verisimilitude than realism itself" (Hegerfeldt, 2005, p. 212), a common effect in magic realist texts.

Real and absent motherhood: “My daughter the fox” and “The White Cot”

7 Motherhood is a theme frequently dealt with in Kay’s short stories. It is for instance an important theme in the stories discussed in the previous section; for Irene Elliot, her problematic relationship with the teenage Mary Ann is a contributing factor in her mental breakdown, and caring for her demanding teenage son proves too exhausting for Doreen, who is also racked with guilt over her perceived inadequacies as a mother: “Until she became a mother she never knew what guilt was really. Once you become a mother, you get to know guilt intimately.” (Kay, 2011a, p. 152) In some cases, the absence or loss of motherhood is the theme, such as in “Mrs Vadnie Marlene Sevlon” in *Reality, Reality*, where the titular character imagines a family for herself, a husband and three daughters who are as real in her mind as if they were flesh and blood (Kay, 2013, pp. 213–26). The two stories discussed in this section, “My daughter the fox” from the collection *Wish I Was Here* and “The White Cot” from *Reality, Reality*, deal with the reality of motherhood and its challenges, on one hand, and the loss (or absence) of motherhood, on the other. Clearly “a nod to Angela Carter” (Liggins, Maunder & Robbins, 2011, p. 249), the first story is marked by what Sandra Alland labels “Kay’s own brand of magic realism” (Alland, 2007), as it is narrated from the perspective of a mother who has given birth to an actual fox. To everyone but herself, her baby daughter, named Anya, is a shocking anomaly, and even though the mother is initially surprised she concedes that this was to be expected given the father’s “foxy” nature (Kay, 2011b, p. 87). While the staff at the hospital are all “quaking and shaking like it was the most disgusting thing they had ever seen”, the narrator wonders how anybody could “not see Anya’s beauty?” (ibid., pp. 89 and 91). Anne Enright characterizes the stories of *Wish I Was Here* as telling “a particular, dreamy kind of truth” (Enright, 2006), and this very much applies to “My daughter the fox”, as it is essentially a tale of a mother’s unconditional love, and ostensibly also “a fable about motherly love [...] for an abnormal child” as argued by another reviewer (Asfour, 2006). Thus, whether or not the child is *really* a fox is left open to interpretation, as the “otherness” of the fox—the way it is rejected, frowned upon and stigmatized by other people—arguably represents disability, deformity, or even “the community’s reaction to white parenting of black children” (Liggins, Maunder & Robbins, 2011, p. 249). There are, for instance, implications in the text that the baby has Downs Syndrome, as the narrator states that “I know her life will be shorter than mine will” and that she had turned forty when her daughter was born (Kay, 2011b, pp. 90 and 95). Further, Kay’s representation of this mother-daughter relationship can be seen to reflect issues pertinent to Kay’s own sexual orientation. Such a reading is especially fitting in view of the story’s conclusion, where the narrator decides to let Anya go free with the other foxes who have been coming to the house wanting “to claim Anya” (ibid., p. 98). As Kay expresses in an interview about revealing to her mother that she was a lesbian:

> I came out to her when I was 17 [...] The language I used was conditional. I said, “How would you feel if I were to tell you I was a lesbian?” and she said, “I would be very upset.” I asked, “Why?”, and she said, “You would be becoming something I don’t know and understand. You wouldn’t be Jackie any more.” She’s very relaxed about it now, though. (Brown, 2010)

8 The narrator of “My daughter the fox” finds that she has to accept her daughter’s true nature, and let her go with her own kind, the foxes of the forest, symbolic of a mother

faced with her child's homosexuality. Similarly, parents need to let go of their children when they are grown up, regardless of any protective feelings. Loving your child unconditionally means both are possible, though difficult, as expressed by the mother: "[T]he hardest thing a mother has to do is give her child up, let them go, watch them run." (Kay, 2011b, p. 98) As argued by Liggins, Maunder and Robbins, this type of transformation, that is the use of an animal to represent an essentially human issue, "shatters the illusion of cosy domesticity in order to symbolise the strains and challenges of motherhood" (2011, p. 249). Again, Kay expresses the importance of simple human truths and emotions, of accepting differences, showing understanding, giving unconditional love to your children, through bringing into the narrative a sense of strangeness, of "magic".

9 Motherhood is also a central theme in "The White Cot", although here it is not an actual state but an imagined, lost one. As stated in Kay's acknowledgements for *Reality, Reality*, the story is partly inspired by Charlotte Perkins Gillman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), and, like Gillman's story, it can be read either as a ghost story, as a story of a woman's descent into madness, or as a combination of both of these. The narrator, Dionne, and her lesbian partner have rented a cottage for their holiday, to help Dionne recover from menopausal anxiety and depression. For Dionne, menopause means a loss of herself, a feeling of anxiety pushing her towards the edge: "I feel as if I've been stolen and some other woman has been put in my place [...] like I'm on the edge of something", she says (Kay, 2013, p. 120). Moreover, she is haunted by the loss of motherhood, that is, her own unrealized dream of having a baby girl many years ago, a ghostly, imagined baby whom she even gave a name, and "thought about her so deeply that I conceived her in my mind", picturing her "so vividly I almost feel that what I went through was a miscarriage" (ibid., p. 125). This spectral, imaginary baby has left a gap in her life, an absence, an unrealized alternate existence. As they arrive at the cottage, Dionne and Sam choose a room in which there stands an empty cot, and soon strange things begin to happen. In the process, the reality of menopausal anxiety begins to merge with Dionne's dream of a child. The boundaries between what is real and what is unreal, or fantastical, become blurred; reality is disrupted by Dionne's conviction that there is a baby in the cot, as she feels "tiny fingers" touching her eyelids, hears noises in the night, a rocking cot, a ghostly baby gurgling, and then "a strange little laugh, a merry little baby's laugh, a frothy high chuckle, delighted and surprised" (ibid., p. 124). These strange occurrences all seem to emanate from the empty cot; simultaneously, Dionne becomes increasingly convinced—unjustly it seems —that her partner Sam is giving up on her, even seeing someone else. Accordingly, there is a growing feeling of paranoia combined with the ghostly appearances (or Dionne's delusions). The empty cot becomes a sinister presence, both enticing and frightening at the same time; Dionne waits longingly for the night, so she can hear the baby gurgling, as well as feels "clammy with fear [... and] sheer terror" (ibid., p. 128). Within the narrative perspective, limited to Dionne, the fantastical (or supernatural) becomes increasingly real, until a sudden onset of menstruation, here symbolic for birth, merges with her realization (or delusion) that the pillow in the cot has transformed into a living baby girl, the one she once imagined into being: "I lifted her out of the cot and rocked her in my arms." (Ibid., p. 130). A realistic reading is that of Dionne having become mentally unhinged, due to her menopausal anxieties and her deep longing for a baby, a longing which has never left her. However, as in Hegerfeldt's classification, there is a duality here, where both a realistic and a supernatural (or

fantastic/magical) perspective are opened up simultaneously (Hegerfeldt, 2005, pp. 33 and 204), like in the other stories discussed above. The cot, an ordinary object found in many family homes, banal in essence, functions as the focus of Dionne's imagination, an intersection between the real and the fantastical.

Old age and lost memory: "These are not my clothes" and "Mind Away"

10 Old age is a central theme in some of Kay's short stories, as well as the effects of memory loss for old people. This perhaps springs at least partly from the fact that Kay's birth mother eventually contracted Alzheimer's, so that she had to leave post-it notes around her home to remind her of things to do, one of these stating "Remember Jackie" ("Interview: Jackie Kay, Author", 2010). These issues are explored in the two stories discussed in this section. The narrator of "These are not my clothes", Margaret, is in an old people's home, where she and the other inmates are mistreated and abused. Kay has explained that initially she wrote the story as a metaphor for how old people are generally treated in society, but later heard about the abuse of old people in a home on the news, realizing that the story was actually truthful in its descriptions of such happenings (Frostrup, 2012). The story shows how Margaret "has been stripped of every freedom and dignity by the abusive and callous staff" (Evaristo, 2012); she is not even allowed to wear her own clothes, hence the story's title, reflective of the sentence Margaret repeatedly utters in protest to the nurse, only to get physically abused in return:

> These are not my clothes, I say to her in answer to her question about whether or not I'm having a peaceful rest. What is it with you? she says and she pulls my hair very hard. I don't know. I try to be nice and you just ruin it all the time. You make me do this time and again. She pinches the skin on the back of my neck really hard and yanks my hair again. [...]
> I keep my mouth clamped shut [...]. The bruises can go from blue and black to yellow and a sort of green you know; they change like traffic lights. (Kay, 2013, pp. 26–7)

11 Margaret's small acts of defiance include not hanging or bowing her head during the saying of grace; she also feels a sense of empowerment in perceiving herself as still having her "marbles" as opposed to most of the other residents (ibid., p. 27). However, her way to escape this unbearable reality is mostly through her imagination, devising a "game plan" of getting a red cardigan with the help of a sympathetic carer, Vadnie (ibid., p. 24). The cardigan would be her own and give her a sense of individuality and empowerment, even a possibility of escape: "If I were dressed head to toe in my own clothes, I might have a chance of getting out of here." (Ibid., p. 28) Her game plan is tragi-comic in nature, as it is "comically likened to an act of heroic resistance which as and of itself seems to contain the possible overthrow of the oppressive system which so often renders older people invisible and deprives them of any vestigial sense of self", as Pittin-Hédon (2017) argues. There is also a duality of self here, as Margaret thinks of herself as two people: "There are two of me [...] the one that's sat on this chair and [...] the one that's planning the Cardigan." (Kay, 2013, p. 26) Thus there is firstly the sad reality of the abused elderly woman, stuck in the care home, powerless, voiceless, stripped of individuality—even stripped of time itself since she does not get to wear a watch, as Matron states: "You don't need to know the time [...]. We know the time, and

we're in charge of the time, the time is none of your business." (Ibid., p. 25) Secondly, there is Margaret's fantasy of the cardigan, her attempt to free herself from the constraints placed on her in this abusive and restrictive environment. In addition, even though Margaret herself believes that she is still firmly in control of her own mind, her mind does sometimes wander. She is therefore teetering on the edge of memory loss, which further works to blur the boundaries between the real and the unreal as reflected in her narration. There are gaps in her memory as she cannot remember what kind of child she was, "or indeed, if I ever was a child" (ibid., p. 28); her past is lost to her. This makes events as related through Margaret's perspective more ambiguous and unreliable in nature.

12 Memory loss is also central to the humorous and poignant "Mind Away", a story in which Jansen argues that "the postmodern blurring of the line between fact and fiction" that is so common in Kay's short stories "reaches its climax" (2018, p. 173). Nora, the mother of the narrator, is suffering from early onset Alzheimer's or dementia, forgetting where she puts things, repeating herself and forgetting her words, so that what she is going to say slips away from her, even in mid-sentence. She feels she is losing herself, and that her memories and words, her sense of self, are being sucked out of her. Having a skill with words and wordplay, Nora compares the experience to liposuction: "Is it the liposuction? [...] That's what's happening to me. My mind's lip sucked! Yep. My mind's lip sucked!" (Kay, 2013, p. 141) The mother and daughter make up a playful story as they speak about this: that actually "a young, dishy doctor" has stolen Nora's words (ibid., p. 135). The narrator meanwhile begins to type a story on her old Olivetti typewriter, where she transfers her mother's missing sentences onto one Doctor Mahmud, who practices at a health clinic in Bishopbriggs. Thus the narrator is actively making a fiction of her mother's situation, imagining that Nora's words have been stolen from her. The short interludes in the text, recounting scenes in which Doctor Mahmud abruptly speaks words that are not his, but really Nora's, can therefore be seen to represent the story typed on the Olivetti. This can be interpreted as the narrator's method of escaping the distressing nature of her mother's illness, as well as her own current circumstances, having recently split up from her partner of many years and now living in her mother's house, suffering a drinking habit that is difficult to break, a fact even her mother recognizes: "'Here you!' my mother said. 'Is it not a bit early for the whisky? It's light out there.' Strange how some things still didn't get past her." (Ibid.) Also, Nora herself, by participating in making up the story—"I'm certain he'll be an NHS man. He'll not be a BUPA doctor!" (ibid.)—is arguably trying to escape her own reality, her memory loss, through imagination.

13 Read in this way, the story of the doctor is a story-within-a-story, separate from the main narrative of the narrator and her mother. However, as the story progresses, it becomes less clear what is real and what is fantasy, until eventually the fiction transforms into reality, as shown in the final scene at the clinic:

> "That's him! Look, there he is!" my mother shouted. [...]
> "Do you know me? Do you know me like I know you?" my mother was saying. Doctor Mahmud stared at the small woman with grey hair, her red coat. There was something familiar about her. [...] "He's the one! He's the one!" my mother shouted. [...]
> It was her voice, Mahmud thought. Where had he heard that voice before? [...]
> "It is you, isn't it," my mother said, agitated. "I chose ... oh what's the word? I chose ..."
> "Responsibly!" the doctor said, blurting it out and surprising himself.

> "Exactly," my mother said. "What is it that they say about snowflakes again?" she said.
> "That no two snowflakes are exactly the same?" he answered. The doctor stared at my mother and my mother stared at the doctor, looking deeply into each other's eyes as if they'd just discovered a long-lost twin, a familiar. (Kay, 2013, pp. 156–7)

14 The fantasy of the doctor and the stolen words has merged with the experiences of mother and daughter. Reality has thereby been transposed into a fantastical realm, or into a kind of middle ground or in-between zone as in Pittin-Hédon's reading of the story, where "real life characters are transferred onto ambiguously fictional ones [...]. This middle ground becomes a confluent space in the sense that it brings together ontological spheres that can't interact" (2017). Within this confluent space, the young doctor functions as Nora's double, as her familiar, as the receptacle of her lost words. Through this particular merging of two "realities", where real-life characters and circumstances are transferred into a fantastical space, and where two perspectives are opened up at the same time (Hegerfeldt, 2005, pp. 33 and 204), Kay brings home the dreadful reality of memory loss while also playing with the idea of the double and the spectral, which again manifests a specifically Scottish element in her writing. Simultaneously, the harrowing experience of memory loss is made more bearable through light-hearted banter and word play, as well as through imagining a situation in which memory loss could potentially be rectified through identifying a person responsible for snatching bits of memory away, an idea only feasible within a magical or fantastical setting.

Unbearable reality, unbearable absences: imagination as intersection

15 Kay has said that *Reality, Reality* deals with people who are "on the edge [... and] are somehow questioning the notion of reality and using their imaginations in one way or another to get them through what is a kind of existential state of loneliness". Further, she expresses her fascination with the question of what is real, in particular in the context of today's technological world, which has changed our ideas of reality. Thus the stories in *Reality, Reality* represent a conversation about questions such as "What is the real world? What is our imagination? Is reality too much to bear? [and] what is real?" ("Jackie Kay at Cheltenham Literature Festival", 2012). A central question is, as stated in one review, "what happens when imagination takes over?" (Rustin, 2012). The above concerns are however not limited to the stories in *Reality, Reality*, as they are central to all the short stories discussed in this essay. For most of the characters in these stories, reality has become unbearable. It is a reality of loss: loss of family, loss of love, loss of dignity and freedom, loss of motherhood, loss of support, loss of memory and words, loss of order, loss of health. In many cases it is a loss of the self, in one way or another. Doreen in "Shell" has grown so overweight that she cannot face her neighbors, or even her own son, anymore, and therefore retreats into her shell, whether it be literal or metaphorical; Irene Elliot has lost her husband and therefore feels adrift, without a purpose in life, ultimately driven mad by a disordered and disrupted reality, fantastically represented by cutlery on the loose. Margaret suffers abuse in the very place she should receive the tender care and attention befitting her age and circumstances, only finding relief through devising a "game plan" of a grand escape; Nora and her daughter together devise the fiction of a word thief in order to make

Nora's old age and memory loss more bearable to them both. Dionne is driven mad by her grief for an imagined daughter and the anxieties brought on by menopause, ultimately retreating into the mad delusion of holding a new born baby, magically transformed from what was a folded blanket in an empty cot. And the mother of the fox girl loves her daughter unconditionally but has to face prejudice and exclusion due to having a child that is different; she is left to care for the child on her own, so that her narrative has an underlying tone of bitterness (Liggins, Maunder & Robbins, 2011, p. 249), also at the way her family and friends have reacted to this new arrival.

16 These women's unbearable reality is one of loss, which again constitutes gaps or absences that are waiting to be filled: filled with a sense of having a shelter from the cruelties of the world; filled with the sense of empowerment and individuality gained from wearing your own cardigan; filled with having a role to fulfil, order to maintain; filled with an alternative self, a mother rocking a ghostly baby in her arms; filled with the words spoken by "a long-lost twin, a familiar" (Kay, 2013, p. 157). The absence of the letter "h" on the old Olivetti typewriter that Mary, Nora's daughter and the narrator of "Mind Away", uses absentmindedly (and drunkenly) to type up the fiction of the Doctor that "runs off with an old woman's thoughts" (ibid., p. 135), is a poignant symbol for such gaps:

> I took the sheet out of the Olivetti. It hadn't quite worked the way I'd planned. The only thing that was consistent was the way the letter h was missing in the Olivetti, it tried to hit h, but then only left a ghost of an h there. *The trut was I was terrified, terrified of losing my mot er, not of er dying but of losing er because s e was losing erself is ow t at sentence would look if I typed it out. It was ard to keep track of w at I was saying wit t e missing*. (Ibid., pp. 151–2, added emphasis)

17 The missing letter can also signify the (spectral) possibility of an alternative reality, one that can fill the gaps or absences of a person's life, and it is here that imagination is of vital importance, since this is what helps the central characters of Kay's stories to cope with reality. Thus imagination functions as an important intersection between reality and the fantastical/magical. Indeed, while imagination helps these women to cope with life, it also works towards an "othering" of reality, a movement reflected in the title of the most recent short story collection, *Reality, Reality*. Pittin-Hédon observes that the repetition of "reality" works to "suggest a second, vertical dimension which adds depth to our sense of the 'real', one that may be added [...] with the input of imagination, which alone can connect and supply the missing links" (2017). In Kay's treatment, imagination makes reality different, it infuses the lives of the characters in question with alternative meaning. Through Kay's special method, of utilizing the banal and commonplace as sites of transformation, reality becomes magical. This is what Hegerfeldt terms a "rhetoric of banality", where elements from the "extratextual world" are rendered fantastic "by relating them in the calm, everyday tone of the realist mode" (2005, p. 200). David Ian Paddy states that "Kay normalizes the different while questioning the sureties of the norm" (2002), and this assessment is very fitting in the context of Kay's use of magic realism, where the real, the ordinary and the banal are transformed into something powerful and extraordinary, imbued with magic. Overall, this particular narrative effect is demonstrative of Kay's extraordinary ability to "mine the mundane and come up with gold" (Birch, 2012).

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ABSTRACTS

Many of the stories in Jackie Kay's three short story collections engage with the lives of ordinary people on the margins of society, such as the elderly, the obese, the sick, the unloved, the mentally unstable, the exploited and victimized. In her stories, Kay explores themes of reality, memory, love and loss, among others. Often, imagination is shown to offer escape from unbearable reality for Kay's characters. In the process, the boundaries between the real and the unreal, the physical and the spectral, the rational and the magical, are destabilized and blurred. This essay discusses Kay's exploration of the above-mentioned themes and how her use of magical realism plays into the transposition of the ordinary and banal into realms of the extraordinary and fantastical.

INDEX

Keywords: Jackie Kay, magic realism, fantasy, short story, Scottish literature

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